

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY EQUAL TALENTS, UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

A Report Card on State Support for Academically Talented Low-Income Students

2ND EDITION



March 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

America has a tremendous need for talent. The vibrancy of our economy depends on talent, and our quality of life is enriched by it. Through educating the nation's youth, our schools have the potential to cultivate the talent of the next generation. Yet the vast majority of students achieving high levels of academic excellence come from upper-income, economically secure circumstances. Low-income students, who now make up over half of our public school population, are much less likely to achieve academic excellence even when demonstrating the potential to do so. These incomebased "excellence gaps" appear in elementary school and continue through high school.

States have an important role to play in ensuring that all local education agencies (LEAs) do what is necessary to cultivate talent among all student populations, regardless of income. This second edition of *Equal Talents, Unequal Opportunities* from the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation assesses the extent to which states mandate policies that are intended to foster academic talent. It also examines the degree to which low-income students participate in advanced learning opportunities and achieve at high academic levels.

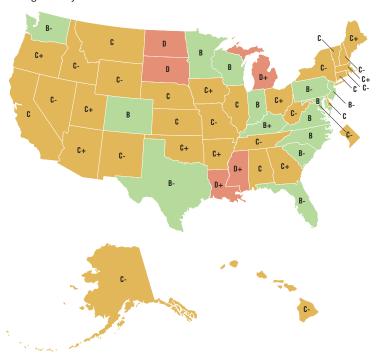
In a departure from the previous report, we separate our assessment of states' general support for *academic excellence* from evidence measuring each state's *excellence gaps*, in response to the growing literature suggesting these are distinct issues with distinct solutions. Each state thus received two grades:

- Excellence: promotion of learning for high-ability students. This grade assesses whether states have implemented policies that promote academic excellence, and the extent to which all students in a state participate and excel in advanced learning opportunities.
- Closing Excellence Gaps: the extent to which low-income students are equally likely to achieve high levels of academic excellence as other students. This grade assesses whether states have policies in place that can help close excellence gaps, and the degree to which low-income students (relative to other students) participate and excel in advanced learning opportunities.

As seen in the figures to the right, 14 states receive a grade of B or better for their work supporting excellence. However,

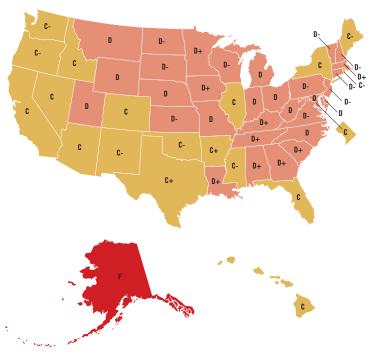
STATE GRADES FOR EXCELLENCE:

The extent to which states promote and achieve learning for their high-ability students.



STATE GRADES FOR CLOSING EXCELLENCE GAPS:

The extent to which states ensure that low-income students have equal access to advanced learning opportunities and are equally likely to achieve high levels of academic excellence as other students.



NO states receive a B or better for closing excellence gaps. There is tremendous room for states to increase their focus on income-based discrepancies in advanced learning. The full report unpacks these grades, examining separately state *policies*, student *participation*, and student *outcomes*, and finds that 38 states did well in at least one of these separate areas. We see small signs of progress since 2015, but there is much room for improvement. All states could implement stronger policies, and all states have observable gaps in the percentage of low-income students versus other students who reach advanced levels of learning.

States can and should take the lead in promoting educational excellence and eliminating excellence gaps. We offer the following recommendations to states:

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Attend to both excellence and excellence gaps.

Interventions that increase overall academic excellence may not address excellence gaps. While it appears that states are slowly increasing their focus on academic excellence, they are far less likely to have policies in place with potential to close excellence gaps. States should treat the goals of promoting educational excellence and eliminating excellence gaps as related, but distinct, objectives.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Maximize identification of students to receive advanced learning opportunities.

Students will never receive advanced instruction unless they are identified to do so. All states should require LEAs to identify advanced students through implementation of universal screening and use of local norms. Teacher preparation should include training on how to identify students who would benefit from increased rigor of instruction.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Ensure that all high-ability students have access to advanced educational services.

States should require services for gifted and talented students; require all educators to have exposure to the needs of advanced students in teacher, counselor, and administrator preparation coursework; and monitor and audit LEA gifted and talented programs for quality. In addition, states should provide for dual enrollment for high school students in college level coursework,

by: partnering with local higher education institutions, providing AP courses, or facilitating dual enrollment in bricks-and-mortar and online college courses.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Remove barriers that prevent high-ability students from moving through coursework at a pace that matches their achievement level.

Allowing high-ability students to move through the K–12 system at their own pace is one of the easiest and most straightforward interventions. State-level laws and policies should require LEAs to allow early entrance to kindergarten, acceleration between grades, dual enrollment in middle school and high school (with high school credit), and early graduation from high school.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Hold LEAs accountable for the performance of high-ability students from all economic backgrounds.

Our analysis of state K–12 accountability systems was based on plans as they existed in 2016–2017. As we completed this study, states were beginning to offer their revised plans under the Every Student Succeeds Act; some of which are qualitatively different from their NCLB-era plans. Although we did not evaluate the new plans due to their draft nature, initial analyses of these plans are not positive from the perspective of promoting high achievement and addressing excellence gaps. The new plans should: give credit for advanced achievement; include high-achievers in growth assessments; separately report growth for high-achievers; and include other indicators of excellence. Accountability systems should also report separately low-income and other students to identify excellence gaps.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Create a comprehensive talent development plan.

Because talent development has been a low priority for most states, relevant policies and programs almost universally have a patchwork feel: gifted education policies and interventions focus on mid-to-late elementary grades; middle school tends to be overlooked; AP policies are treated separately, as are dual enrollment policies. The lack of coordination among these moving parts leads to dysfunctional talent development systems that comprehensively address neither excellence nor excellence gaps. States should develop comprehensive P–16 plans for developing talent.

The Cooke Foundation is dedicated to advancing the education of exceptionally promising students who have financial need. Since 2000, the foundation has awarded \$175 million in scholarships to more than 2,300 students from 8th grade through graduate school, along with comprehensive counseling and other support services. The foundation has also provided over \$97 million in grants to organizations that serve such students.



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